2026 Conservation Farm Family of the year award nomination

Nominee: Matt and Sarah Winker – Redline Dairy

2513 County Road A

Belgium WI 53004

Nominator: Geoff Schramm Ozaukee County Land and Water Coordinator

121 W Main Street Port Washington, WI 53074

1. In 2008 I had the pleasure of meeting Matt and Sarah Winker at their Dairy Farm in the town of Belgium, WI where they were milking a herd of 100 Holstein Dairy cows. In the year 2011 Matt and Sarah decided to add a manure storage, access road, waste transfer on the farm which they were renting. By 2014 they moved farm locations and relocated onto a different farm owned by his mother in law named Redline Dairy. At this location Matt and Sarah started to make changes to improve water quality by upgrading an older manure storage facility and adding an additional storage with the assistance of EQIP. Additionally waterways were added along with subsurface drainage to deter gully erosion in several owned and rented fields. Matt started no tilling his farm fields in 2014; most of these are a heavy clay or clay loam soil texture. In 2016 when the producer led groups and demo farms started to enter into the conservation world Matt eagerly joined both of these organizations to showcase his change in cropping practices. Both he and Sarah are leaving the traditional dairy farm model and have slowly turned to rotational grazing for their growing Devon beef and Dorper and Katahdin sheep operation.

2. In 2014 Matt began no tilling his crops into a high residue planting system. By 2016 he became a board member on the Milwaukee River Clean Farm Families producer led group and Demo Farm for Ozaukee County. Matt's goal was to increase infiltration and decrease farm inputs while maintaining a profitable farm. One of the earliest national speakers brought to Ozaukee County was Ray Archulletta. Ray spoke about crimping cereal rye to reduce chemical inputs for weed control. This practice intrigued Matt and he was the one of the first in Ozaukee County to try this while no till planting his crops. In the past prior to grazing he also interseeded cover crops to have a living cover after the removal of the feed for his dairy herd.

   By converting 340 acres to grazing and tweaking his farm field practices he has increased the rain infiltration to upwards of 3 inches per hour and erosion has been greatly reduced to .3 lb. per acre.

3. Matt started as a board member and is now the Vice Chair of the Milwaukee River Producer Led Group, and he and his wife are an active Demo Farm with NRCS. By being the Vice Chair he attends monthly board meetings where he assists county staff with coming up with new or promoting innovative farm practices which other landowner can try in the county. He assists with outreach programs such as the yearly Poker Runs, Popup Educational field events and speaking to the general public about the practices being applied onto the landscape to reduce sediment and runoff reaching the local waterways. Matt is a guiding factor in helping to select National Speakers at the yearly winter public meeting which draws around 100 people a year. He truly is a community leader, listener and advocate for local conservation.

Back Row Left to Right Mark Kohlbach, Adam Melichar, Brian Huiras Jr, Brian Vorpagel, Neal Majewski, Dave Brunquell Front Row Left to Right Matt Winker, Mike Paulus and Bob Roden

Matt's tractor with the crimper on the front

Planting green crimping the rye and no till planting the corn.

Matt with the county interseeder planting cover crops into standing corn

Matt and Sarah Winker with their two daughters Mikyla and Maggie

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# Leading an eco-revolution in farming

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## County, farmers work together in Demonstration Farm Network to show how better practices can reduce not only pollution but costs of growing

TOWN OF BELGIUM FARMER Matt Winker is a member of the Ozaukee County Demonstration Farm Network, which encourages using cover crops and other methods to reduce runoff and save money. Photo by Sam Arendt

**By**
**DAN BENSON**
*Ozaukee Press staff*

Ozaukee County is in the forefront of efforts to limit the amount of soil and chemicals that run into area streams and into Lake Michigan.

Town of Belgium dairy farmer Matt Winker is happy to show other farmers how they can help.

Winker's 450-acre Red Line Dairy is part of the Demonstration Farm Network that formed last year and focuses on teaching farmers how to use cover crops and other methods to reduce runoff.

It also can save farmers money, Winker said.

"Big time. We're saving ourselves a lot of money," said Winker, who started using the practices about two years ago.

He estimates the new practices save him about $10,000 a year in fuel because he makes fewer passes over his fields. They also have cut his fertilizer and herbicide costs in half.

"We were even able to sell off a tractor. We just didn't need it anymore," he said.

And the soil has changed, he said.

"The nitrogen level and microbial activity have gone up and runoff into streams has gone down. You can't put a dollar figure on that," Winker said. "Every time you run over that field, you're sending carbon in the air and your best soil and chemicals into our water."

The no-till, crop-cover approach increases the amount of rainwater that penetrates the soil.

"In a tilled field, the soil normally can absorb about a half inch of rain; one inch if you're lucky," Winker said. "A covered field can take six or seven inches of rain, and you're protecting the soil because those rain drops come down like they're shot out of a gun."

He said his neighbors and passing motorists can tell the difference.

"We're dragging a lot less mud onto the roads," he said.

Cover crops also shade the soil from the heat of the sun and help suppress weeds, Winker said.

He said other farmers are skeptical.

"You know, 'My grandpa and my dad taught me to do it this way.' We're trying to break generations of habits," he said.

"But when you're listening to a speaker from North Dakota or Missouri and they're telling you they haven't used Round Up (weed killer) in 10 years, that's impressive," he said.

The way it works for Winker:

In the fall, after the crop — corn, soybeans, alfalfa or wheat — is harvested, he passes through the field to spread manure and "drills" rye grass between the rows of corn.

"After the drill pulls out of the field, that field will not be touched until the planter comes back in spring," he said.

At that time, some of the rye will be chopped and fed to cattle. The remaining rye will be "crimped," or bent and crushed to the ground, providing cover for the soil underneath.

"The cover captures the carbon from the sunlight and nutrients from the air and puts them into the soil, for free," Winker said.

To help convince farmers to give the practice a try, Ozaukee County is in the process of buying an interseeder planter that converts to a no-till grain drill, a roller-crimper and cover crop seed.

Ozaukee County Land and Water Management Director Andy Holschbach said the plan is to make the equipment available, perhaps for a nominal fee, to local farmers in hopes they will adopt the practices.

It's possible the county would employ a farmer part-time to demonstrate how the equipment is used.

"The hope is that people would start incorporating the practice and buy their own equipment," Holschbach said.

The equipment is paid for with $5,000 from the county tree fund and state grant money, he said.

Ozaukee County's Demonstration Farm Network is one of only three in the state, the other two being in the lower Fox River valley and the Kewaunee River watershed area near Door County.

"It's unique that we have this in Ozaukee County," Holschbach said.

The network works closely with the Milwaukee River Watershed-Clean Farm Families group, which also is active in Ozaukee County.

The network focuses on improving the quality of water flowing into Lake Michigan while the Clean Farm Families focuses on the Milwaukee River and on soil health.

Both efforts include some of the same farmers and are supported by state programs.

There are cash incentives through Clean Farm Families to encourage farmers to give the practices a try.

They include:

- $35 per acre, up to $2,000, for planting cover crops.
- $50 per hour, up to 10 hours, for low-disturbance manure application.
- $15 per acre, up to $1,500, for implementing conservation tillage practices.
- $18 per acre, up to $1,000, for a nutrient management plan.

"We're really focused on soil health practices — something green and growing on your field all the time to protect your soil, to have as little soil disturbance as possible," Holschbach said. "If you get those things right, you get the biology of your soil increasing, prevent runoff and the nutrients are better cycled through your soil."

Holschbach said the effort is part of a national movement and more and more farmers are joining in.

"It's a huge endeavor. We have a special opportunity going on here," he said. "I truly believe if the farming industry would follow these principles we would do a lot to improve the water and soil quality in our county."

For more information on the Demonstration Farm Network, call Holschbach at 284-8313.

For more information on Clean Farm Families, go to www.cleanfarmfamilies.